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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the study of children's reading interests and their attitudes toward reading as these factors relate to leisure-time reading. The problem of poor performances on measures of reading achievement by African-American children from low-income families has been studied for over 3 decades. Additionally, sociocultural and environmental factors that may affect the reading performance of inner-city, African-American, middle-grade (grades 5-8) children have been the subject of much research. However, that research has not focused on the African-American student or the out-of-school setting. Moreover, little attention has been given to the reading attitudes, interest, and motivation of these children. The paper discusses the need to examine the attitude, interest, and motivation of inner-city, African-American, middle-grade children toward leisure reading. It also discusses the importance of examining the interrelationships that may exist among attitude, interest, and motivation. Contains 40 references and a figure illustrating an affective model of reading. (Author/RS)

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Factors Influencing the Reading Status of Inner-City, African-American Children

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PERSPECTIVES IN READING RESEARCH NO. 8
Fall 1995

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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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Abstract. *This perspective addresses the study of children's reading interests and their attitudes toward reading as these factors relate to leisure-time reading. The problem of poor performance on measures of reading achievement by African-American children from low-income families has been studied for over three decades. Additionally, sociocultural and environmental factors that may affect the reading performance of inner-city, African-American, middle-grade (grades 5–8) children have been the subject of much research. However, that research has not focused on the African-American student or the out-of-school setting. Moreover, little attention has been given to the reading attitudes, interests, and motivation of these children. This perspective discusses the need to examine the attitude, interest, and motivation of inner-city, African-American, middle-grade children toward leisure reading. It also discusses the importance of examining the interrelationships that may exist among attitude, interest, and motivation.*

Recent research indicates an alarming trend among adolescents in the value placed on reading. The Commission on Reading Education (Anderson, Hiebert, & Scott, 1985) wrote that there was a lessening in the degree to which students value reading at the secondary level. Students do not view reading as important to them. Rabban (1990) found that not only was there a low level of literacy among students, but that, disturbingly, even students who rank high on SAT scores and are skilled in reading, read only in connection with course work. Shirring (1990) and Powell (1989) reported similar findings.

In a study of 104 tenth- and eleventh-grade students in a middle- to upper-middle-class community (composed of 70% non-Hispanic whites and 30% African-Americans, Hispanics, French, Orientals, Iranians, and Jamaicans), Dickinson (1992) corroborated these observations and findings. Of the 104 students, 85% were reading at grade level and beyond. The remaining 15% were slightly below grade level. These students responded negatively when assigned reading activities. They were reluctant readers who could read but who chose not to do so. They complained that their schedules did not allow sufficient time for leisure reading. Some said that they would not have chosen reading as a leisure activity even if they had had the time

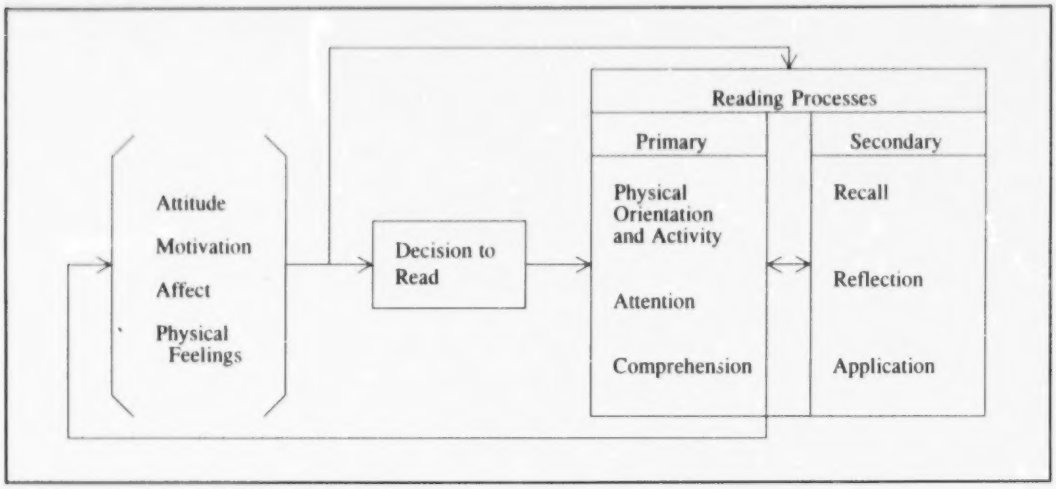

Figure 1. Affective Model of Reading*

*From "Toward a Comprehensive Model of Affect in the Reading Process," by G. C. Mathewson, 1985. In H. Singer and R. B. Ruddel (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (3rd ed., p. 846). Copyright 1985, International Reading Association. Reprinted with permission.

because they felt it was boring. Less than 5% of their free time was spent in reading for pleasure.

Despite the perceived importance of time spent reading, increasing numbers of students are choosing not to engage in leisure reading. There is a serious lack of reading engagement exhibited by students who can but choose not to read. Guthrie, Bennett, and McGough (1994) have described reading engagement as "the act of *choosing* to read frequently for a variety of reasons and *comprehending* the texts appropriately within the context of the reading situation" (p. 2).

Many authors believe that at the bottom of students' failure to read is motivation. Atwell (1987) cites the lack of motivation as the reason students view reading as a chore rather than a pleasure. It appears that motivation is a less tangible, changeable process than was previously thought (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985) and that motivation is not necessarily a personality trait.

Shirring (1990) observes that the lack of freedom students experience in selecting their reading materials directly relates to their inertia in leisure reading. Students who are not free to choose materials according to their needs and desires eventually lose interest in the reading process.

Affective Model of the Reading Process

The theoretical framework for this perspective draws on Mathewson's (1985) affective model of the reading process. Because

affective factors, with a few exceptions, have been neglected in models of the reading process, Mathewson proposed a research-based model identifying the central substantive constructs and processes describing the role of affect in reading. He established a central affective component around which to build the model. Of the possible candidates—value, belief, interest, attitude—only attitude has played a central role in the development of American social psychology; *attitude* thus became a central construct in a model of affective influence on reading. This model of the reading process is depicted in Figure 1.

Although *attitude* is centrally important in Mathewson's affective model, *motivation* is no less important and has been added to "insure that a favorable attitude has a separate, energizing process to accompany it. Thus, if children are to read, they will need not only a favorable attitude toward reading, but also an appropriate motivation" (Mathewson, 1985, p. 842). By identifying *affect* as a separate construct, the model also posits a continual interaction among *affect*, *attitude*, and *motivation* in reading behavior.

The final construct of the affective component is *physical feelings*. "Physical feelings arising from outside sources sometimes occur during reading, or physical feelings related to the meaning of the reading material itself sometimes intrude themselves into the reader's consciousness" (Mathewson, 1985, p. 845). Feelings arising from both internal and external sources may influence a person's decision to continue to read.

The model predicts that the *decision* component influences the primary and secondary reading processes in the same way. A person's decision to read, whether primary or secondary processes are involved, is based on attitude, motivation, affect, and physical feelings. Furthermore, feedback from the reading processes may influence the affective component, as symbolized by the line at the bottom of the model.

Although the affective component influences both primary and secondary reading processes through decision making, the model also predicts a direct influence of the affective component on these processes. This direct influence, illustrated by the arrow along the top of the model, bypasses the model's *decision* component and influences both the *primary* and *secondary reading processes* without cognitive mediation. Thus, Mathewson's affective model of reading indicates that attitude, motivation, affect, and physical feelings together influence the reading process, both directly and indirectly.

Attitude and Leisure Reading

Many studies of leisure reading have lacked an affective component; far more attention has been focused on how cognitive factors relate to leisure reading. It would appear, though, that a favorable attitude would be a necessary precondition to a willingness to devote some leisure time to reading. A child without a favorable attitude is likely to select from among the many available leisure activities (Greaney & Hegarty, 1987).

A favorable attitude toward reading and achievement in reading have long been assumed to be positively related. That is, a positive attitude toward reading about a particular topic

or body of information should increase attention and/or comprehension which, in turn, increases reading achievement (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1988; Mathewson, 1985; Parker & Paradis, 1986). So widely accepted is this belief that few researchers have questioned it.

In the past few years, however, studies have begun to show that the relationship between attitude toward reading and achievement in reading is more complex than once was thought, and may be less strong. Lipson (1983), for example, found that prior knowledge had an influence on recall (comprehension) and that culturally compatible reading materials resulted in greater accuracy of recall than did conflicting materials. Hollingsworth and Reutzel (1990) found that prior religious schemata apparently aided subjects in reconstructing religiously compatible materials with greater ease and precision.

Greaney and Hegarty (1987) investigated the relationships among recognized correlates of leisure reading (achievement, sex, library membership, socioeconomic status, and family size) and additional variables suggested by a literature review. The additional variables were: *attitude toward reading*, *motivations for reading*, and *home/environmental measures*. They found that book reading (which obviously requires some skill in reading) correlated more highly with attitude toward reading than such variables as reading achievement, verbal ability, and class standing. Moreover, this study, even after controlling for sex, reading achievement, and library membership, found that attitude toward reading correlated significantly with book reading. This finding suggests that in the development of the leisure-time reading habit, the child's attitude toward reading is an important factor in its own right. Attitude toward reading also correlated significantly with reading enjoyment, a finding which suggests that "the development of a favorable disposition toward reading is related to the level of satisfaction derived from earlier reading experiences" (p. 16).

Henk and Holmes (1988) explored the effect of college-aged readers' attitude toward content on their comprehension of information regarding nuclear power. Results of that study indicate no significant differences among the groups in free recall tests and multiple-choice tests.

Based on the results of the study by Henk and Holmes (1988) and on Mathewson's (1985) work and recommendations, Hollingsworth and Reutzel (1990) conducted a study in which prior knowledge was controlled, attitudes were experimentally induced, and the effects of content attitude on readers' comprehension and recall of text information were further explored. The quantitative results suggest that content-related attitudes do not significantly affect subjects' reading comprehension. The qualitative results suggest that attitudes may affect reading comprehension in qualitatively different ways" (p. 198).

The findings of these recent studies support the theory that the relationship between attitude toward reading and reading achievement may not be as strong and positive as is often assumed. Furthermore, these studies suggest that other factors—age and race, for example—may affect the strength of the relationship between these two variables. Research continues in this area.

The developmental period of adolescence is characterized by a simultaneous onslaught of many changes—changes related to puberty, school transitions, and the emergence of sexuality (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). Although, for most individuals, these changes do not bring excessively high levels of stress, many do experience difficulty during this period. Studies focusing on children's attitude toward school and school subjects suggest a general developmental decline across the third to tenth grades in the value children place on academic achievement and on their intrinsic interest and motivation for school work (Duggins, 1989; Eccles, Midgley & Adler, 1984; Harter, 1981; Wigfield, 1984).

Simmons and Blyth (1987), when explaining the decline in attitudes toward achievement in young adolescents, have argued that the transition to junior high school forces many students to reevaluate their attitudes, beliefs, and self-perceptions, because of the environmental differences and the increased demands of junior high school. These differences include a greater focus on assessment and on social comparisons among students (Feldlauther, Midgely, & Eccles, 1988), along with stricter grading systems (Higgins & Parsons, 1983; Kavrell & Petersen, 1984).

Similarly, Eccles and her colleagues (1993) focused on the mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded them by their social environments. They adopted a developmental variant on the *person-environment fit* paradigm or the *stage-environment fit* approach, and contended that negative attitudes and motivational behaviors exhibited by young adolescents result from a developmental mismatch between the individual and the environment. For example, junior high schools allow less decision making and choice at a time when the adolescent desires control, and they focus on lower-level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher level strategies is increasing (Eccles et al., 1993). Thus, it seems that the change in attitude toward school and achievement that is characteristic of many young adolescents may be a consequence not only of negative changes in school environment (Feldlaufer et al., 1988; Higgins & Parsons, 1983; Kavrell & Peterson, 1984; Simmons & Blyth, 1987), but, to a greater extent, a poor stage-environment fit as well; that is, the decline may be occasioned both by the developmental stage (adolescence) and the lack of fit between their special developmental needs and the environment (Eccles et al., 1993).

However, discrepant results have been obtained in studies of African-American adolescents. Researchers have discovered that many African-American young people express sentiments that reflect very positive attitudes toward getting good grades and toward academic achievement in general; yet, they score below the 10th percentile in verbal and quantitative measures on statewide tests of performance (Mickelson, 1981). Others stress the importance of education in getting ahead, but place little emphasis on the effort necessary to achieve that goal (Ogbu, 1990). Similarly, students expressed a desire to go to college to escape poverty, but were often absent from school and negligent in their work.

It has been shown that a positive attitude exerts an important affective influence on

reading and may be fostered by the provision of suitable materials for reading, opportunities to read for pleasure, as well as by other activities that make reading a satisfying and rewarding experience. Interestingly, the less students regard reading as a means of attaining certain cognitive goals, the more likely they are to develop favorable attitudes toward reading (Morgan, 1984).

More than a favorable attitude, however, may be necessary to develop the habit of leisure reading. It appears that *interest* has an active, energizing component that *attitude* does not have (Mathewson, 1985). Nevertheless, the two are related. Attitudes change as interest increases. The greater the interest in reading, the greater the possibility that children will read on their own.

Interest and Leisure Reading

The terms *attitude* and *interest* are often confused or used interchangeably; however, attitude is the wider term and represents a person's general orientation. Interest is more specific than attitude and is directed toward a particular object or activity. Attitude does not necessarily entail an interest, but interest always entails an attitude. For example, one "may be favorably disposed toward artichokes, but have no interest in them at all" (Duggins, 1989, p. 5). In the case of reading, a child cannot be interested in a book and have no attitude toward it (Purves & Beach, 1972). Yet, the child can have an attitude toward a book but not be interested in it. Attitudes, like beliefs and values, determine the *degree* of liking and disliking, while interest determines the *direction* of people's actions (Feather, 1987).

Exploring the nature of children's interest in reading has been a major topic of research over the past 50 years, and although the studies have used a number of different methodological strategies, certain consistent patterns of interest are evident (Greaney & Neuman, 1983). Research shows that as children grow older, the factors that influence what they read gradually change (Williams, 1989). Of all factors, the age and gender of the reader are among the most influential, with gender being the stronger of the two factors. As beginning readers, primary-school children tend to be interested in a wide variety of topics, both factual and fictional in nature. As the children reach the upper elementary grades, the number of topics they find interesting declines and the influence of gender on topic interest increases. This relationship is not surprising because a great many books come to be recognized either as "girls' books" or as "boys' books." Gender-related differences appear to peak at the middle-school level (Moray, 1978).

Beyard-Tyler and Sullivan (1980) observed that preference for male lead characters over female lead characters increased significantly for boys as they move from seventh to eleventh grade, whereas the preference of girls for female lead characters over male lead characters decreased significantly. This phenomenon may be culturally based. As children grow older, their environment typically becomes less female-oriented and more male-oriented. According to Beyard-Tyler and Sullivan (1980), females "may infer that males often play a more important

role in society and/or that many of society's privileges and prerogatives are accorded to males. As a consequence, they may learn to value the male role to a greater degree than the female role" (p. 118).

In a second study, Beyard-Tyler and Sullivan (1980) examined the theme preferences of adolescents. The theme study was conducted to determine whether adolescents prefer stories with positive, problem-solution themes or stories with negative, no-solution themes. The results showed a strong and consistent preference of adolescents for synopses representative of positive, problem-solution themes. This finding was unexpected. Many books with negative or no-solution themes from the genre of contemporary fiction rank high in popularity among adolescents. It is possible that the negative or no-solution themes suggest to adolescents that they will be unable to solve problems associated with certain types of behaviors or conditions (i.e., use of drugs, alcoholism, delinquency, and alienation).

On the assumption that reading interests are related to reading ability, McKenna (1986) examined the preferences of 526 low-achieving students in grades seven through twelve. Students' responses to 44 suggested topics were analyzed by both the age and the gender of the students. Among the tendencies noted were that (1) the reader's gender had a stronger influence on reading interests than did the reader's age; (2) girls tended to prefer affective topics more than did boys; (3) boys tended to prefer topics related to physical activity, machines, and science more than did girls. Similarly, Greaney and Neuman (1983) found that boys generally preferred subjects dealing with adventure, mystery, sports, and science fiction containing action, whereas girls enjoy romance, humor, and family-oriented stories.

Children's leisure reading habits may also be influenced by the function the reading serves and the alternatives available. The individual's needs determine these functions. Applying a "uses and gratification" approach, Greaney & Neuman (1983) conducted a study to explore the functions of reading for students in grades three, five, and eight in Ireland and the United States. They investigated why children read and what needs are satisfied by reading. Three distinctive factors were identified in each culture: (1) *enjoyment* described the students' personal responses and is intrinsic in nature—persons scoring high on this factor consider reading exciting and interesting; (2) *utilitarian functions* described the intrinsic rewards—persons scoring high on this factor consider reading as useful in school and for later careers; and (3) *escapist reading* was described as a substitute function—persons scoring high on this factor indicate that reading is most likely when there is nothing to do, to pass time, or to distract themselves from personal worries.

Results of the study showed that irrespective of culture, girls scored higher than boys on reading for enjoyment and boys read more than girls for utilitarian purposes. A comparison between Irish and United States students revealed that Irish students tended to read more for enjoyment and utilitarian purposes than did students in the United States, where students scored highest on reading for escapist purposes, particularly at the eighth-grade level. Thus, we see that gender, age, and culture seem to have

an influence on the leisure reading interests of middle-grade students.

Motivation and Leisure Reading

Although Mathewson (1985) has identified attitude as being centrally important in the affective model of reading, motivation is no less important. Motivations for reading have been defined as "internalized reasons for reading which activate cognitive operations that enable the individual to perform such acts as acquiring knowledge, enjoying aesthetic experiences, performing tasks, and participating in social contexts" (Guthrie et al., 1994, p. 3). These internalized reasons for reading, or motivations, were discussed earlier in terms of reading interest factors: (1) reading for enjoyment; (2) reading for utilitarian purposes; and (3) reading to escape (Greaney & Neuman, 1983).

Social and educational psychologists have investigated the motivation to read through theories of achievement motivation (Wigfield & Ascher, 1984). Although a complete review of achievement motivation is beyond the scope of this perspective, several theories are relevant to our discussion of leisure reading motivations. These are self-efficacy, attribution, and self-determination.

Self-efficacy refers to a person's own beliefs about his or her ability to reach certain performance levels (Bandura, 1986). Researchers hypothesize that self-efficacy affects choice of activities, effort expenditure, and persistence. Students with low self-efficacy for accomplishing a task may avoid it; those who believe they are capable are more likely to participate. Students who feel they can perform well, especially when facing obstacles, ought to work harder and persist longer than those who doubt their capabilities. Individuals acquire information to gauge their self-efficacy from their actual performances, vicarious (observational) experiences, forms of persuasion, and physiological indices (e.g., heart rate, sweating). The belief that they are acquiring skills raises learners' self-efficacy and promotes their motivation and skill development (Schunk, 1990).

Attributions are important cues used by individuals to assess self-efficacy for learning (Schunk, 1989). Attribution theory assumes that people seek to explain the causes of important events in their lives. A series of studies provided the empirical base for developing an attribution theory of achievement behavior. Weiner et al. (1971) postulated that students are likely to attribute their academic successes and failures to such factors as ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Moreover, the attributions people give to explain success and failure are postulated to have consequences for achievement motivation, expectations for success, achievement value, affect, and achievement behavior. For example, individuals high in achievement motivation (especially males) were more likely to assume personal responsibility for success than were those low in achievement motivation. Individuals low in achievement motivation were more likely to believe that failure was due to lack of ability, whereas the group high in achievement motivation was more likely to believe failure was due to lack of effort (Wigfield & Asher, 1984).

Are there differences in the attributional process based on race and socioeconomic status (SES)? Although Weiner et al. (1971) hypothesized that race and SES differences in achievement could be due to differences in attributional processes, few studies have assessed this possibility. However, some support for this hypothesis was obtained in a study of success and failure attributions of high- and low-achievement-motivated African-American men and women, which indicated that males were more likely than females to define personal success in terms of external attributions (Murray & Mednick, 1975). However, more research is needed to assess this situation.

The theory of *self-determination* is related to theories of self-efficacy and attribution. The self-determination theory, when applied to the realm of education, is concerned primarily with promoting in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education, and a confidence in their own capacities and attributes. "These outcomes are manifestations of being intrinsically motivated and internalizing values and regulatory processes" (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 325).

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are engaged in for their own sake, for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from their performance. Intrinsically motivated people engage in activities that interest them, and they do so freely, with a full sense of volition and without the necessity of material rewards or constraints. The child who reads a book for the inherent pleasure of doing so is intrinsically motivated for that activity. Intrinsically motivated behaviors represent the prototype of self-determination—they emanate from the self and are fully endorsed. Extrinsically motivated behaviors, on the other hand, are instrumental in nature. They are performed not out of interest, but because they are believed to be instrumental to some consequence (Deci et al., 1991).

The personal beliefs about one's capabilities and the attributions given to explain success and failure are postulated to have consequences for achievement motivation. When that motivation is intrinsic (i.e., emanating from within), activities are engaged in for their own sake (self-determination). These theories of achievement motivation may help us understand motivation and its influence on leisure reading.

Summary

Mathewson's (1985) affective model of reading shows attitude as a central construct in the reading process. A favorable attitude toward reading and achievement in reading have long been assumed to be positively related; however, more recent studies have shown that the relationship may not be as strong and as positive as was once thought. Also, a number of studies have indicated that other factors, such as age and race, may affect the strength of that relationship.

Although a positive attitude has been shown to exert an important affective influence on reading, attitude must not be confused with interest. Attitude is the wider term and represents a general orientation of the individual. Interest is more specific than attitude and is directed toward a particular object or activity.

Much research has explored the nature of children's interests, including those of middle-graders. These studies show that as children

grow older, the influence of age and gender on what they read gradually changes. As children reach the upper-elementary grades, the number of topics they find interesting declines, and the influence of gender on topic interest increases.

Motivation is no less important than attitude and interests in Mathewson's affective model of reading. Students' self-efficacy, attributions, and self-determination for learning are just three aspects of their achievement motivation that may influence their leisure-time reading habits.

It has long been thought that children who read well do so because they read frequently, and they read frequently because they enjoy reading. Nevertheless, recent research indicates that many students who are among the most able readers do not choose to read for pleasure. Increasing numbers of these students exhibit limited leisure reading engagement; many able readers view reading as a chore rather than a pleasure. This perspective points to the need for researchers, as they investigate this problem, to consider a number of variables including students' age, gender, race, achievement motivation, prior knowledge, and prior classroom experiences. The challenge to literacy researchers is to examine the way these variables work independently and together to influence students' leisure reading habits—to determine if the variables that influence middle-grade students' leisure reading are different than those that influence high school students' leisure reading, and to determine if the variables that influence European-American middle-grade students' leisure reading are different than those that influence African-American middle-grade students' leisure reading.

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